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Title: Review of *Stop Thief! Anarchism & Philosophy* by Catherine Malabou

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Review of *Stop Thief! Anarchism & Philosophy* by Catherine Malabou

Catherine Malabou, *Stop Thief! Anarchism & Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK/Hoboken, NJ: Polity Press, 2023). 268 pp. ISBN: 978-1-50955-522-2.

In 2022, Catherine Malabou published *Au voleur! Anarchisme et philosophie*, now available in English. A student of Derrida, a long-time Hegelian, and professor at several prestigious institutions emerges as an acolyte of anarchy!

With a characteristically esemplastic and authoritative voice, Malabou insists that we acknowledge anarchic roots in a group of white male political scientists – Reiner Schürmann, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Jacques Rancière. Assuming knowledge of these figures and others, the book is written for an “advanced” audience, despite the delightful cover art with its pointillist portrait of anarchist curator and art critic Félix Fénéon.

In calling us to recognise that some of the most citable philosophers disavow their indebtedness to a rich tradition considered beyond the pale by many, the book invites us to honour our inspirations. In doing so, the author does anarchism a sizable intellectual favour.

To start with, Malabou defines anarchism as “a fight against mechanisms of domination, which exceed the sphere of the state [...] and affect all domains of life – public, private, collective, individual” (p. 8). The etymological building blocks of *an-archy* are: “an” – without, while “*archē*” is “the structure that, right from the beginning of the Western tradition, links state sovereignty and government to one another” (p. 10). Thus, anarchy is order grounded in “non-governability [...] that which remains radically *foreign* to commanding

and obeying” (p. 23).

Drawing from Proudhon’s insight that property is robbery, Malabou wonders “Is it too much to claim, then, that there has been a philosophical theft of anarchy from the anarchists” (p. 18)?

To ascertain the foundations of “*archē*” as the principle of executive power, chapter three considers a series of aporias in Aristotle’s *Politics*: i. *citizens, rulers, ruled*; ii. *regime as governing body*; and iii. *the subject of Politics*. While the ensuing analysis is justified within the parameters of the book, it is also indicative of the orientation of Malabou’s thought. Anarchists are distrustful of hierarchical superstructures, like Aristotle’s worldview. When it comes to anarchy in antiquity, it is respectful to call upon a movement whose ill fame is comparable to that of anarchists – sophists. As Plato caricatures sophists in his *Dialogues*, so Alain Badiou defaces anarchists in a quote deployed by Malabou (p. 13). In any event, it would have been mutually beneficial for the author and readers, had the book considered the timeless Protagorean provocation. Neither a nation-state nor a natural science, but “a human being is the measure of all things” – conveys “freedom from the rigid schemes in the sphere of thinking and sensibility”, an observation by Alexey Losev in *A History of Ancient Aesthetics vol. II*. In short, already in sophists we find an emancipatory insight verging on the ungovernable, and it is a pity this vital anarchic dimension of pre-Socratic thought eludes Malabou.

Like the anarchists he disavows, Schürmann points to the hypocrisy of rulers who fail to obey the rules they attempt to impose. In placing themselves outside of the *archē*, while claiming it as the foundation of their legitimacy, they reveal the inherently unstable anarchist il-

lusion of separation. Threading “together the Aristotelian *archē* [and] an interpretation of its deconstruction by Heidegger” (p. 38), Shürmann makes a similar separation of ontological anarchy from political anarchism. Meanwhile, Malabou separates the latter from philosophy declaring ‘Philosophy makes it possible for anarchy to undertake the work anarchism did not do: the work of meditating on the principle without which anarchy is only another version of the reign of *archē*’ (p. 56). Such separation is not necessary when we accept anarchism as a living tradition with vibrant philosophy examining these selfsame questions (e.g., Gustav Landauer’s *Revolution and Other Writings* and James Martel’s *Anarchist Prophets*).

Like in Schürmann’s ontological account, Levinas distances his ethical “an-archy” from anarchism, not least because he supported Zionism (p. 61-2). How to establish an ethical relation of the archic self to the an-archic Other? Through transcendence, a fragile “voyage [...] go[ing] beyond ontological categories” that pull us back to the archic paradigm. By contrast, “anarchic responsibility” implies that “obedience precedes command” following “no order whatsoever” (pp. 67-9). For Levinas, the ability “to obey without any rule being presented to consciousness [...] is a sign of election. Anarchy and election are sisters” (p. 70). Conversely, anarchy and slavery are rivalries. Servility denotes an attitude to a master marked by the appreciation of domination. “Why [then] does Levinas consistently claim that the state is necessary” (p. 75)? For Levinas, “to institute order in anarchy” we need a state (p. 76). Not any state, of course, but “the state of David”, of “being-for-others”. Would this orderly state rely on David’s Sling for protection?

Dedicated to Derrida, chapter six elucidates the nexus between anarchism and power. Yes – deconstruction is anarchist in the sense that “its strategy is always to identify fault lines of institutions. And ‘no’ in so far as there is no rupture without talk and negotiation” with archists (p.

84). Thus, Derrida’s “anarchy-anarchism” revolves around “yes and no” (p. 85). To this end, Malabou foregrounds Derrida’s reading of Sigmund Freud’s pleasure principle as the *archē* of psyche, its “sovereign authority” (p. 86). However, destabilised by trauma, “psychic energy overflows the principle, flooding it” (ibid.). Thus, the death drive becomes a candidate for psychic anarchy, triggering a question: “is beyond the principle beyond power, or is it the essence of power?” – is it a source of insatiable domination or fresh creation unleashed? Here Derridean scepticism is instrumental, “in the impossibility of a clean break between the two: the boundary separating them is always fragmented and divided” (p. 87). While for Freud the power dynamic between the pleasure principle and the death drive remains unresolved, Derrida posits the drive for power as “the sole master and commander”, rendering an-archy incongruous (pp. 88-9). And what lies beyond the principle of mastery is nothing else but another hypostasis of power: “Between principle, government, control [...] there is only *différance* of power” (p. 101). Having a leaning toward both her teacher and anarchy, Malabou “no longer know[s] whether to say “yes and no” (p. 109).

Interestingly, Foucault refused the (dis)avowal of anarchism. Malabou makes the startling claim that his anarchism, so often misunderstood, “is a secret even for him” (p. 119), perhaps because he is not simply anti-government, but critical of the mentality of governance, which can even be presented as autonomy (p. 122). Drawing upon Gilles Deleuze and others, Malabou makes clear that she has little time for those critics who claim Foucault is part of ushering in neoliberal individualism. Like Emma Goldman endorsing individuality while rejecting individualism, Foucault might well celebrate what contemporary activists call prefigurative action – “change without any need for government [...] through transformations in ways of liv-

ing” (p. 141). Disagreeing with Judith Butler, Malabou argues convincingly that Foucault’s project leads him, in the end, to “the space of anarchism” (p. 142).

Next, Malabou interrogates anarchy through Agamben’s notion of profanation, conceived as a political, rather than religious category – “a matter of suspending a power” situated “between potentiality and actuality”, between “the anarchic fracture” of being and acting (p. 146). It is Jesus Christ who most graphically enacts this “dual place of sovereign and *homo sacer*. Supreme power and bare life” (p. 166). Profanatory anarchy deactivates *archē* not only by leaving it behind, but also by releasing inchoate potentials thereby creating conditions for new possibilities (p. 168–9). Intriguingly, in Agamben, anarchy “finds its place in the zone” (p. 176), a rather enigmatic space, reminiscent of the zone in Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*, a cinematic masterpiece greater than philosophy, poetry and other arts that brought it to life. No wonder Malabou dubs it a “magic argument” (p. 174), which naturally can’t satisfy a philosopher, in a modern – academic – sense of the term.

Like many of us, Rancière simultaneously distances himself from the dogmatism and violence of some “anarchism”, while recognising the richness of this tradition. Where many believe that a lack of *archē* and anarchists rules out the possibility of order, Rancière calls for a “Radical equality [which] is not a property; it is not, and cannot be, an *archē*” (p. 182).

Rancière’s anarchy is further revealed in his critique of Lyotard’s valorisation of “the witness [who] is always a subject under interrogation – *the witness exists only for the police*” (p. 204) and the drama of the performative state. And yet, we continually bear witness to the possibility of anarchist praxis in historical and contemporary examples in the face of widespread disbelief, which Malabou sees as a form of trauma, because in the wider collective consciousness, anarchism “has no place” (p. 206). This brings us back to Proudhon and the ways in which laws construct meanings and places as if they were owned, penalising for disobedience, and thus accomplishing the perfect theft.

We like to think of anarchy as “the art of relating freely as equals”, dependent upon humility. Unable to place itself on a pedestal from which to judge others, humility involves no *archē*. We might, then, question the labelling of others as thieves and invoke the humility of the indigenous spiritual teacher and lover of wisdom Yeshua who, in reference to agents of the state, declared “forgive them, they know not what they do”. Similarly, in closing, Malabou turns to the indigeneity of the Sami and the Inuit, who chose to live at the edge of possibility, resisting domestication and “all relations fixed to a unifying identity” (p. 217) – to *archē*. Perhaps, then, domination is not a problem to be “fixed”, but a pattern to be undone through the embodiment of anarchy: the art of relating freely as equals.

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